

Chapter One

“Shouldn’t you be running?” Terkle asked.

“What?” Cory stepped back from the ledge and looked around himself. Ervil was lying in a puddle of his own barf and bile. Porter was checking his vitals, confirming he was still alive, and looking disappointed about that. The big ugly skinhead was still sitting where Cory had left him, nursing a nosebleed, and Zeus had just been snatched by an alien predator who looked like Cory’s childhood sweetheart and who’d just survived being shot six times. Cory’s ears were still ringing from those gunshots, but as far as he could tell, no one was chasing them.

“That sound,” Terkle explained, pointing at something in the distance. “Does that not mean that enforcers have been alerted?”

Cory cocked his head to the side and listened to the ringing in his ears, which was getting louder. It dawned on him that what he was hearing was actually police sirens, but Cory had a more immediate concern. “Did she eat him?” he asked.

“What?” It was the skinhead’s turn to look confused.

“My uncle. Zeus. The guy your friend just grabbed and jumped off the side of the building with, did she eat him?”

“Oh!” The big skinhead chuckled. “He is a criminal...”

“That doesn’t give her the right to eat people!” Cory screamed.

The skinhead held his hands out in what was meant to be a calming gesture, but which still made Cory instinctively put his hands up in an almost identical defensive posture. “She has a contract to capture and return him to authorities for the crime of entering a protected colony,” he reassured Cory. “She cannot eat him.”

“Oh.” Cory lowered his hands a bit.

“So it is unfortunate that you are also not a criminal.” The skinhead looked off into the distance, listening to the sound of the approaching sirens. “But now is not the time to discuss philosophy.” He stood up, then reached out, offering a hand to Cory. “Shouldn’t we be going?”

“What?”

“He’s talking about your freedom,” Porter moseyed over with his six guns in his hand. “And whether you have a right to it. It’s philosophy, see, ‘cause rights only exist between your ears.”

“I meant the ‘we’ part.” Cory retorted.

Porter opened the revolver and ejected the six spent shells. “You ain’t gonna catch ‘em up without some help.” He took a handful of bullets out of his pocket and methodically reloaded. “So listen closely, ‘cause you ain’t got much time. Your old man once told me someone might come looking for him someday, someone who could take on the appearance of different people and who I wouldn’t be able to kill. And if that was to happen, I was to tell you not to go into the Holy of Holies, but through. I thought it was just some sort of prophecy, and to be honest, I never really did believe in that sort of thing...”

“Yeah, well, I used to,” Cory said bitterly.

Porter shook his head. “Your old man called it the ‘transgression of digression.’ Said I insert too many asides, that it kills whatever point I was trying to make. Which is that you’re supposed to go not into the Holy of Holies but through...”

“I said I used to believe in that shit,” Cory interrupted again. “That means I don’t anymore.”

Porter looked like he was in pain. “Cory, your dad knew a lot of things,” he started to say.

“He pretended to be a prophet.” The constant reminders that his father wasn’t who he said he was were really getting to Cory.

Porter shook his head. He spun the cylinder on the revolver, gave it that sad, loving look that parents give their kids when their kids leave for college, then snapped it back into place. “Way I see it, a prophet is someone who knows about things beyond this world.” He flipped the gun forward in his hand so that it was hanging upside down on his index finger, then did that little flippy trick cowboys do to turn it back right-side-up in his hand with the butt facing forward. “Which makes your old man the most prophety prophet I ever met.” He held the pistol butt-first out to Cory. “Don’t worry; I got a backup.”

Cory accepted the gun awkwardly. “Why do I need this?”

Porter pointed at the skinhead. “That’s for in case he gets frisky.”

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